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ABSTRACT

Increasingly over the past several years, the reading of literature has been viewed as a social interpretive process. Conceptions of reading have changed from a largely cognitive process of print decoding to a socially situated one of understanding and appropriating a variety of discourse and text conventions. "Difficulty" is the result of the similarity or disparity between the text and the socially imbedded and motivated interpretive processes of particular readers. Students must learn to become comfortable with complexity and ambiguity in the presence of teacher messages that reward simple solutions. The literary "transaction" of reading involves several kinds of understandings: (1) self-understanding; (2) social understanding; (3) literary understanding; and (4) aesthetic understanding. Literary reading cannot be easily measured or defined, or developed discretely as a set of skills. The interpretive culture created by teachers' questions can stifle the multiple, complex understandings necessary to the literary experience, potentially compounding the difficulty of literary texts. Teachers' questions should guide students as they move toward their own interpretive horizons. In questioning and sharing experience, students and teachers become empowered to embrace the difficulties unique to literary reading. (Forty references are attached.) (SG)

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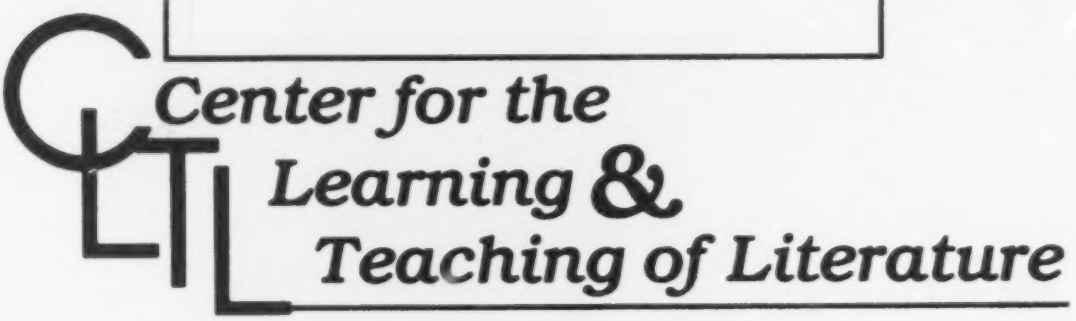
Questions of Difficulty in Literary Reading

Susan Hynds



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Report Series 4.6

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Questions of Difficulty in Literary Reading

Susan Hynds
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Teacher questioning techniques have long been heralded as a vehicle for reducing the difficulty of literary interpretation, as a means of testing how students grapple with that difficulty, and as a way of increasing students' interpretive skills by leading them through progressively "higher" levels of thinking. Unfortunately, the ways in which teachers have traditionally used questioning as a means of teaching, testing, and skill-building have often promoted the very interpretive difficulty that these techniques were intended to mitigate. More than this, teachers, through their questioning techniques, have often encouraged students to look for easy answers rather than to grapple with the essential complexity and incompleteness of literary texts.

Over the past several years, the reading of literature has been increasingly viewed as a social interpretive process. As poststructuralist theories of literary criticism and social-cognitive views of discourse development have gained prominence, conceptions of the reading process have changed from a largely cognitive phenomenon of print decoding to a socially-situated process of understanding and appropriating a variety of discourse and text conventions.

In a social view of reading (Hynds, in press), readers always operate from particular interpretive contexts. Thus, "difficulty" is not a feature of particular texts, but the result of the similarity or disparity between dimensions of the text and the socially-embedded and motivated interpretive processes of particular readers.

In literature classrooms on the secondary level and beyond, students must learn to "read" not only particular literary texts, but the codes, conventions, and interpretive norms of a particular teacher's classroom. Thus, one difficulty of school reading is that students must often "reinterpret" their immediate perceptions of literary texts, in order to balance or bring their views into conformity with the views of the teacher and the classroom literary community.

The comments of Ken (names are fictitious), a 12th-grade student, reveal the powerful influence of teachers' questions on his reading and interpretive process:

K: We'd have these packets and, you know, you'd read a chapter and you'd have questions . . . that you'd answer from the chapter. . . . I remember getting a lot of packets, you know?

I: How did you feel about those packets?

K: Uhm, sometimes I thought, you know, I like reading and enjoying the reading, and sometimes the questions that they ask . . . I thought I read it well and took my time, you know, I couldn't remember, I couldn't get the answer. You'd have to go back and look. . .

I: When you're going to read something for classes as opposed to when you just read something because you want to read it, do you read it differently?

K: A lot of times I'll like, if I get questions that I know I have to answer, I'll look at the questions first and then when I read I'll maybe make a mark or something, you know, . . . cause it's annoying when you have to go back and search through and you know that you remember where it was but you have to search back, but . . . if it's for pleasure I just read carefree . . . I just read, you know, at whatever pace I want and just enjoy it. I don't really concentrate too much. (Hynds, 1989)

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this conversation is that Ken seems to put his interpretive capacities to use, not in exploring the hidden meaning of the literary text, but in interpreting the teacher's not-so-hidden agenda. He has learned, for instance, that reading for school means reading toward a predetermined conclusion. His classroom reading reflects a guessing game in which the teacher's questions guide him toward simple solutions and away from the complex problems of literary interpretation and response.

Students' Perceptions of Teacher Questioning

The comments of many students reveal how often teacher questions accentuate the difficulty of literary reading, rather than equipping students to deal with it. First, in tending to simplify the interpretive process to a quest for "one right answer," teachers' questions often serve to set up a reading stance that turns students away from issues of interpretive complexity. This reductionistic perspective leaves young readers ill-equipped to deal with the interpretive gaps (Iser, 1980) that distinguish literary texts from other kinds of texts. In the previous excerpt, for instance, Ken talks about going back to look through the text and remembering places in order to "get the answer" he is searching for.

In addition, teachers' questions often reveal contradictory expectations about how to succeed in the classroom interpretive community. Teachers may tell students to explore their own unique interpretations, yet send powerful messages through their questions on tests and in class discussions that undermine and undervalue student opinions and hunches. As Jay, a high school senior, muses:

> I don't know. It's supposed to be your language and you're supposed to be able to do it perfectly and English teachers are often like really picky, and everything has to be exactly right. . . .I don't know, for a native language, it comes off like, **hard** . . . especially when it's not like "basic" English. Like when you're reading Shakespeare, poetry--I mean, that's when it's usually the hardest for me.

Thus, in promoting the idea that interpretations must be "exactly right," teachers tend to disempower students in dealing with interpretive difficulty on their own. As they read the underlying messages behind teachers' questions, students often adopt a teacher-dependent, submissive role--a position which holds them back from creating or exploring an innovative or fresh interpretation. Ken's searching back and remembering "where it [the answer] was" in the text is an indication that he views literature as a **container** for **correct meaning**, rather than a fertile ground for exploration and interpretation.

In addition, many approaches to classroom questioning emanate from a cognitivist,

"reading comprehension" perspective, where students are supposedly led, through increasingly "higher level" questions, toward increasingly complex levels of thought and interpretation (Herber, 1967; Manzo, 1979; Raphael & Pearson, 1982; Stauffer, 1959, 1969). While useful for describing non-literary reading, such approaches focus almost exclusively on literal or interpretive comprehension, rather than more affective personal responses. Furthermore, it is somewhat simplistic to associate "higher level" questions with higher level thought, and "lower level" questions with purely literal thought (Langer, 1985, 1989).

It is not surprising, for instance, that in reading for pleasure, Ken "reads at his own pace," is "carefree," and just "enjoys it." In Ken's case, his teachers' "prereading" questions often preclude the engagement and exploratory attitude that might have actually invited him to grapple with the difficulty of literary reading. In fact, in an earlier interview, Ken had observed:

> I think that if you're reading a novel . . . [teachers] have to know if you've read it and stuff like that, you know, they have to ask some questions, but . . . [they should] ask maybe general ideas of the chapter instead of specifics, you know, like . . . "describe what the character went through". . . something where you'd have to think, but you wouldn't have to go searching for the exact quote. . . which would still, I think, accomplish the same thing, because you're actually thinking about what happened and discussing it. More interpretive questions than "What happened here?" I think. (Hynds, 1989)

Teacher questions from a reading comprehension perspective often ignore the "literariness" of literary texts, narrowing, rather than broadening response, and privileging answer-hunting, rather than aesthetic involvement in the reading act. Ken's strategies of looking at the teacher's questions first and marking the text are appropriate, perhaps, for studying a history or science text, but entirely inappropriate for reading a literary work.

Thus, the "difficulty" of literary reading in the classroom goes far beyond the difficulty of understanding and interpreting texts. Students must learn to become comfortable with complexity and ambiguity in the presence of powerful teacher messages that reward simple solutions and "best" interpretations. They must learn to be independent readers in a classroom culture that encourages intellectual dependency and adherence to interpretive norms. They must preserve their personal affective responses in a climate that focuses largely on literal or inferential meaning-making. And finally, they must recognize the "literariness" of literature in an environment where tests and skill-building activities predominate. It is time for a reconceptualization of what we mean by "understanding" literary texts, and a reconsideration of how teachers' questioning techniques might enrich rather than impede students' encounters with difficulty in literary reading.

Questions about Literary Understanding

Any competent reader understands that reading a novel is not the same as reading a science text. Literature not only **informs** readers, it **transforms** them in subtle or profound ways. Through their encounters with literature, readers come to know and understand themselves, the world in which they live, a variety of literary techniques and conventions, and their own aesthetic experiences. Through these understandings, they develop identities as

individuals, as members of particular communities and cultures, as readers, and as humans, capable of aesthetic appreciation. Thus, the literary "transaction" (Rosenblatt, 1978, 1985) is a multidimensional process, requiring various kinds of understandings.

Self-understanding

Through the literary experience, readers develop identities as individuals in the world of ideas and people (Holland, 1973, 1975; Petrosky, 1976), and as critical readers in a literary community (Rogers, 1988). As readers make autobiographical associations (Beach, in press; Petrosky, 1981), they discover more about their own growth, as well as their attitudes and beliefs about the world in which they live. As they encounter a variety of texts, they develop the capacity to read critically, discovering their identities within a community of readers. Thus, through their encounters with literature, readers develop as individuals, as social entities, and as literate persons.

Social Understanding

Readers also learn to understand and interpret social and interpersonal relationships (Beach, 1983; Hynds, in press), as well as the norms and conventions of particular cultures (Purves, 1986) relevant to literary works. In understanding the social and cultural context, as well as the factual content of particular literary works, readers are then able to understand the degree to which texts derive or deviate from "real world" phenomena; they learn to distinguish fact from fantasy.

Social knowledge includes not only an understanding of the rules, norms, and expectations of the larger culture, but also the rules and expectations that define what it means to succeed as members of classroom literary communities (Hynds, 1989, in press; Marshall, 1987, 1989). As they participate in classroom discussions, and as they are evaluated in written assignments, readers learn to interpret and understand literature according to the underlying norms and expectations of teachers and peers. Thus, the reading of literature expands and enlarges readers' knowledge of their social world, as well as their understandings of multiple social contexts within which they live and read.

Literary Understanding

Readers must learn to understand a variety of literary conventions for a rich appreciation and interpretation of literature (Beach, 1985; Fish, 1976; Mailloux, 1982; Culler, 1975). Beyond this knowledge, readers also acquire the ability to make intertextual connections (Beach, Appleman, & Dorsey, in press), linking one literary work to another, comparing and contrasting techniques, themes, characterizations, and so forth. Finally, readers must understand what orientation or stance is most appropriate for particular readings (Vipond & Hunt, 1984; Rosenblatt, 1978)--whether to read aesthetically or efferently, for information, for story, or for deeper meaning.

Aesthetic understanding

Literary texts, as distinct from other types of texts, are both artifact and meaning source. As readers experience literature as aesthetic artifact, they are temporarily able to think "the thoughts of another" (Poulet, 1980, p. 44) and to become absorbed in the act of reading, rather than other, more peripheral concerns (Rosenblatt, 1978).

What's so Difficult about Literary Reading?

From a reading comprehension viewpoint, readers bring prior knowledge to bear on non-literary texts in fairly predictable ways. Texts can be classified as more or less "readable" through standardized readability formulas. Readers can be classified as more or less "skilled" by a variety of quantitative tests. Skills hierarchies and levels of thinking can be identified, making it possible to classify teachers' questions and students' responses as "higher" or "lower" on some intellectual scale.

However, there is obviously a certain danger to applying non-literary models to literary reading. As other essays in this collection argue, literary reading cannot be so easily measured or defined. For one thing, there is never "one ultimate goal" for reading, responding to, or interpreting a literary text. Self-understanding, for instance is no more or less valid than literary understanding. A point-driven orientation is not superior to a story-driven orientation, though certain stances may be more appropriate for certain literary texts and contexts than others.

Furthermore, literary understandings cannot be developed discretely as a set of skills. Developing a point-driven orientation requires, for instance, more than teaching students to read for meaning or theme. As Vipond, Hunt, Jewett, and Reither (in press) have argued, it means teaching readers to read "dialogically"-- viewing the text as an intentionally crafted product of an author, attempting to create a particular effect on a reader. This dialogic reading requires readers to understand the effects a text has on them, what literary conventions define such effects, how the text comes to mean in terms of their own personal identities, and how the text reflects the values, norms, and expectations of particular cultures.

Further, readers' understandings of what stances are appropriate for particular texts derive from their knowledge of literary conventions, as well as their knowledge of the appropriateness of those stances within their classroom community of readers. Thus, considering the incredible complexity of what it means to "understand" literature, it is important to realize that simply asking "higher order" questions will not automatically promote the multidimensional insights and emotional responses necessary for a complete encounter with literature. Nor can teachers' questions be categorized in terms of the degree to which they promote discrete understandings of self, social relationships, literature, or the aesthetic experience. Teachers' questions, the way they are presented, the surrounding instructional experiences, and the subliminal messages that students perceive, all combine to create a particular culture--one that rewards particular stances, interpretations, and attitudes toward what it means to "understand" a literary text. Often, this interpretive culture created by teachers' questions stifles, rather than enlarges, the multiple and complex understandings essential to the literary experience.

What's so Difficult about Classroom Questioning?

Simplifying Complexity: The Myth of "One Best Response"

Jay, a 12th-grade student, remarks on a former teacher's strategy of questioning students in order to validate her own preferred response:

> I had this teacher this year who thought that [her idea was the only idea] and I didn't get along at all with that teacher . . . . We just sat there and she'd always like [say] "Be quiet" or "pay attention" . . . . She had a set idea of what [the interpretation] was gonna be and she was gonna tell us. I mean, she tried to get the question--she questioned us to try to come up with that idea . . . and that's kinda tough when you're talking about literature. . . . (Hynds, 1989)

It is perhaps some small encouragement that, in his twelfth year of formal schooling, at least Jay was able to show a little awareness that literary texts have more than one correct interpretation. Although it is possible that Jay's teacher intended to help her students to explore ideas within and beyond the literary text, her questions carried a clear message that the goal of literary reading was to come up with one acceptable idea, rather than to play with and explore textual difficulty. Her questioning techniques apparently served to narrow, rather than broaden Jay's response. They drove him away from the interpretive problems that might have potentially engaged his interest and stimulated his thinking.

The essays in this collection note the unique character of literary reading to embrace, rather than circumvent, interpretive difficulty (see, for example, Elam and Adams, this collection). Similarly, Davison, King, and Kitchener (in press) have noted the difference between, for example, a story problem in arithmetic and the problem of pollution in the real world. Citing Churchman (1971) and Wood (1983), they contrast "puzzles" with what they term "ill-structured problems." Developing "reflective thinking" in individuals, they argue, involves presenting them with **problems** to grapple with, rather than **puzzles** to solve.

Davison and his colleagues challenge teachers to develop "problems for which the student's current assumptions are insufficient and which cause the student to seek more adequate ways of thinking about a problem" (p. 20). By its very indeterminacy, complexity, and relative unfamiliarity, literature presents a whole host of possibilities and interpretive problems for students to explore. The very act of literary reading demands a tolerance of the multiple tensions and disruptions inherent in the literary encounter. As Iser has noted:

> In the oscillation between consistency and "alien associations," between involvement in and observation of the illusion, the reader is bound to conduct his own balancing operation, and it is this that forms to esthetic experience offered by the literary text. However, if the reader were to achieve a balance, obviously he would then no longer be engaged in the process of establishing and disrupting consistency. . . . In seeking the balance we inevitably have to start out with certain expectations, the shattering of which is integral to the esthetic experience. (1980, p. 61)

In the face of this potential discomfort and dissonance, Davison and his associates argue

that teachers must "create an atmosphere of thoughtful reasoning . . . [and] acknowledge that the revolutions in thinking that are implied by the Reflective Judgment model are frequently disturbing, frustrating, and even frightening" (p. 20).

Unfortunately, Jay and his teachers have carefully avoided the shattering of illusions and preconceptions so essential to literary reading. Most often, students know that there are a variety of possible interpretations to any literary text, but they implicitly agree to arrive at and conform to the teacher's preferred response in order to succeed in school.

Cathy, a 12th-grade student, has just read "This is My Livingroom" by Tom McAfee. Her somewhat cynical view of teachers and the arbitrariness of their interpretations reveals that she has learned all too well how to play this interpretive game.

I: Do you think that [this story] would be a good story to teach in English class?

C: Well, I think it would be hard because I think everyone would get a different idea. I mean, I don't know where I got the World War I thing. It kinda popped in my head. But I think, if a teacher had gotten the same idea I [did] she would have just kinda made the story fit what she just kinda thought of.

I: So do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing--everybody having a different idea about the story?

C: Well, I think it's harder to teach it if, you know, the more different ideas. It would be okay if the teacher was going to try and accept and develop other people's ideas as well, you know, it wouldn't be like one way that the story goes . . . .

I: How do you feel in a class when everybody seems to have different ideas?

C: Kinda dumb.

I: Does the teacher do anything to kinda make that easier?

C: Well, it depends. If they're [the ideas are] really far-fetched, she'll kinda laugh or say, "Well, I don't think so." But sometimes it seems like she, she tries to make things fit the way she read it. (Hynds, 1989)

Holland (1986) echoes Cathy's dilemma when he says:

> At any given moment a teacher may be giving a student hypotheses or hypotheses for finding hypotheses or may be carrying a hypothesis through its testing to sense the return. All these are familiar strategies in teaching. All use the students' responses but seek a homogeneity of response. Typically, this kind of teaching uses only those responses that can be generalized, shared, or otherwise made available to all the students. (p. 444)

In privileging only those responses that can be shared or "made available to all the students," teachers such as the one Cathy describes set up a "least-common denominator"

approach to interpretation--one that obliterates the private, idiosyncratic, hypothesis-generating response so essential to literary reading.

Thus, our students are often aware of the need to conform to our often "arbitrarily correct" responses and interpretations of literary texts. When students come to believe that our interpretations are the only ones sanctioned in examinations and other graded projects, our influence on student learning is even more pervasive. Even more disconcerting, however, is that students learn to avoid, rather than to embrace, complexity in literary reading. Notice how these students appear to shy away from literary complexity in classroom reading contexts:

> J: In math or science you're doing more actual like activities and problems, or you're doing a lab or something and ah, I mean that's a lot different than trying to figure out why an author wrote or uses this symbol or wrote what he did. . . . It's more definite for one thing, because when you're trying to figure out, I mean even after an English teacher has like, in your class, come up with why an author wrote something like his, ah, his motives or whatever . . . you say "Is that true?" I mean, there's no definite part about it. (Hynds, 1989)

> C: I think like, reading comprehension, for some reason I've always had a little trouble with it. 'Cause I hate to like try and think about things. I'd rather just try and read it [the text]. (Hynds, 1989)

Thus, the myth of "one correct response" sets students up to expect something that does not and <u>should</u> not exist in literary reading: an absolute and incontrovertible interpretation. On the contrary, the interpretive tensions created by competing or alternate explanations are what separate literary from non-literary reading in the first place. As Iser (1980) has argued, "the gestalt formation in the reader's consciousness runs counter to the openness of the text" (p. 334). This very tension, he proposes, is essential to literary reading. In Iser's terms, the reader's strategies when confronted with fictional texts "are usually so designed that gestalt formation creates its own latent disturbances" (1980, p. 334).

Similarly, as Perry and Sternberg (1986) have suggested, due to the often contradictory interpretations suggested by literary texts, readers must frequently engage in "multiple systems of gap-filling" (p. 314). The co-existence of conflicting hypotheses in literary reading leads to "heightened perceptibility" (p. 321) on the part of the reader. Although human beings must rely upon multiple systems of gap-filling in real life, Perry and Sternberg suggest that typically, only one of two "real life" hypotheses "fits the case, only one of them can be right. . . . In a literary work, on the other hand, two contradictory hypotheses may both be valid, since their co-existence may be aesthetically motivated and legitimated in terms of artistic intentions" (pp. 321-322).

Unfortunately, the interpretive hegemony fostered by many teachers' questions often disturbs the very tensions and difficulties of interpretation that make literature truly "literary." The myth of one best response, then, actually increases the difficulty of literary interpretation by endorsing the mistaken notion that correct interpretations clearly emerge. This pseudo-scientific quest for one acceptable response flattens the literary experience, rendering it devoid of its essential complexity and indeterminacy.

Autonomy, Objectivity, and the Myth of the Individual Response

In addition to sidestepping issues of difficulty in literary texts, students are often threatened rather than enriched by the interpretations of their classmates. Ideally, the classroom community should promote cooperative learning, deriving largely from the "intersubjective" responses of other readers (Bleich, 1986). Class discussions, in the view of most teachers, exist for the purpose of allowing students to compare competing viewpoints and enrich their own subjective interpretations.

Bleich (1986), for instance, describes the "thought collective in which individual readings take place: for example, the family, the classroom, the academic meeting" (p. 418). It is in the sharing of readings that intersubjective interpretations are generated. Citing a number of feminist scholars, Bleich indicts the views of much masculine scholarship that privileges interpretive objectivity, autonomy, and independence--a view that runs counter to his collaborative or intersubjective view of reading.

In adhering to this autonomous model of interpretation, teachers' questions often foster an attitude of competition rather than collaboration, as Hal, a 12th-grade student, poignantly observes:

> When [I'm] in the classroom, like everybody, a lot of times, are kind of shy to say something 'cause, you know, it might not be right . . . there's been a lot of stuff in my mind this year in English class, that we discuss, that I could have said. I just sat back and listened to everybody else. (Hynds, 1989)

Thus, teachers' questions within the surrounding context of the examination or the literature discussion tend to isolate readers and to make them fearful of a sort of "intellectual plagiarism." Such a viewpoint tends to make them suspicious, competitive, and, regrettably, often silenced in each other's presence.

Pseudo Questions, Trick Questions, and "Beating the System"

Many students seem to believe that in class discussions and literature assignments, teachers ask "pseudo" questions, rather than questions the teachers really want to explore. Perhaps because their evaluation methods are incongruent with their goals of enlarging and privileging readers' unique responses, teachers are perceived as asking "trick" questions on examinations, just to determine, at baseline, whether their students have read the material they have assigned. This minimalistic approach to reading and evaluation does much damage to the way students approach literary texts. Jay remarks on the difficulty of answering such pseudo questions on a test:

> When I'm reading a book in English I gotta know everything that was going on and exactly what was happening because . .. because the teachers they come up with these questions that are so specific. I mean it's like, I hate quotes on a test. . . . It's like "who said this and what were they saying when they said this and what was their meaning" . . . . You might remember it, but you can't put the person's name on it and you . . . might not know who said it because of the way it's said, you might not know the context exactly. Because you could have been several places where they could have

said it . . . . (Hynds, 1989)

Unfortunately, however, not all students are as astute about the potential arbitrariness of teachers' questions as Jay seems to be. Hal passively accepts his teacher's lack of tolerance for multiple responses in class discussions and tests as one of the hazards of the grading system.

H: Sometimes you might disagree with them [classmates], and then if the teacher agrees with them and you might think that they're right and you're wrong.

I: It' all this "right and wrong" stuff, isn't it?

H: Yeah, I think a lot of it is what you interpret it to be. 'Cause the author, you'll never know if the author meant it, what you interpreted, unless you see him and ask him. So, I think a lot of authors and poets write stuff so everybody can have so many different ways to look at . . .

I: And so, in light of that, in light of the fact that probably authors try to make multiple meanings out of texts, why do you suppose in schools we often see it the other way around, like there's only one meaning?

H: 'Cause I guess they gotta have some basis for grading and to discuss and they can't keep bringing it, they don't have enough time to go through with it.

I: Do you think that's fair?

H: Oh, not really. But there's nothing anybody could do about it. (Hynds 1989)

When teachers' questions are perceived as purposely tricky--when teachers ask questions with narrow, often meaningless answers, students read with an attitude of "beating the system," or worse yet, like Hal, they feel powerless to succeed, and try to move through the experience as quickly and painlessly as possible.

If Jay's and Hal's comments are any indication, little seems to have changed since 1966, when Louise Rosenblatt first wrote:

> To do justice to the text, then, the young reader must be helped to handle his responses to it. Yet the techniques of the usual English classroom tend to hurry past this process of active creation and re-creation of the text. The pupil is, instead, rushed into peripheral concerns. How many times youngsters read poems or stories or plays trying to memorize as many random details as possible because such "facts" will be the teacher's means of testing--in multiple answer questions--whether they have read the work! . . . Even the search for meaning is reduced too often to paraphrase that simply dulls and dilutes the impact of the work . . . . Our assignments, our ways of testing, our questions about the work, our techniques of analysis, should direct attention to, not away from, the work as an aesthetic experience. (in Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 285)

Questioning Levels, Skills Hierarchies, and Reading Processes

Although many of us wish to believe that our questions serve to teach students to think beyond the text, often our questions seem to exist for the purpose of creating clear-cut grading distinctions and separating "good" from "poor" readers. We think that by asking "higher level" questions and by leading students through progressively more difficult levels of thinking, we will help students to master difficult texts. However, often we succeed only in interfering with our students' natural meaning-making processes. Judith Langer's poorer readers, for instance, spent much time in the "being out and stepping into an envisionment" stance. Langer argues that "rather than moving 'up' a scale of abstraction to an 'interpretive' level, students learn to develop a store of qualitatively different options to use in particular circumstances for particular purposes" (p. 20). Arguing against hierarchical approaches to literary reading, Langer calls for "an alternative to existing category systems that are primarily based on types or levels of response" (p. 20).

Cathy is an example of an exceptionally insightful reader, whose reading processes are greatly disrupted by the pressures of evaluation and time constraints in classroom examinations and discussions. She explains that:

> There's more stuff in my mind [in English class] that I just haven't had time to sort out . . . . If I haven't gone over a story or something really carefully and . . . I just haven't sorted it out enough to deal with it . . . and then there's a quiz or something, I'm like trying to write down everything without answering the question. (Hynds, 1989)

Cathy's understanding of the text is greatly impaired whenever she is asked to "step out and move beyond" her envisionment when she is still trying to step in.

As the comments of these students indicate, teachers' questions in tests and written assignments are frequently indices of students' test-taking ability, rather than their interpretive skills. More than this, such approaches often force students to apprehend literature from a purely cognitive framework, ignoring or suppressing their engagement or affective processes. Thus, such questions often interfere with meaning-making processes and encourage a submissive attitude toward literary reading. All of these influences disable, rather than enable, readers to grapple with interpretive difficulty. Patrick Dias (in press) has recently observed:

> To read and answer someone else's questions is not to read and appropriate the text for oneself. Such an approach inevitably relegates literary reading to the category of school-based activities, dependent on instruction and teacher monitoring to validate it. In such contexts, pupils cannot but read with a 'question-answering' schema in mind, a schema derived from past experiences with teachers' questioning procedures, a schema that includes consideration of the subtle verbal and non-verbal cues that signal approval and disapproval. Such an approach is inappropriate for the reading of literature, for the reading of texts for one's own sake, for reading to discover and consider one's own questions. (p. 11)

Literary and Non-literary Stances

The question of what constitutes literature is perhaps as old as the study of literature itself. Classroom curricula organized by historical period seem to reflect the opinion that literature is what "stands the test of time." Modern approaches to secondary literature teaching seem to emanate from the view that adolescent literature is whatever adolescents actually read.

Current theories of literary reading, however, argue the impossibility of defining "literature" apart from a consideration of the dynamic literary transaction. Louise Rosenblatt (1985) has observed that:

> "[T]he reading experts ignore what is usually called "literature," and the "literary" folk, starting with an agreed-upon canon of "literary works," usually ignore the problems of the reading of "ordinary" prose and how it differs from "literary" reading. Each group therefore tends to fall back on seeing "literariness" as inherent in the text, seeking this in content and in syntactic and semantic convention. (p. 101)

Rosenblatt argues that the difference between literary and non-literary reading "reside[s] in what . . . is brought to the center of attention and what is pushed into the periphery or ignored" (p. 101). Literary reading, as Rosenblatt defines it, is predominantly "aesthetic." What is brought to the center of attention in reading literary texts is the immediate experience of reading, not what the reader will take away from that reading at some future time.

Langer (1989) has distinguished literary from non-literary reading, in that literary reading involves "reaching toward a horizon," rather than "maintaining a point of reference." In reaching toward a horizon, Langer's readers "treated their growing understandings more openly, raising possibilities about the horizon as well as about momentary ideas, focusing on the human situation, seeking to understand interplays between events and emotions and eventualities--toward an understanding of what might be" (p. 19). In non-literary reading, Langer's readers "worked closely, using the topic as a frame of reference, building and refining meanings as they moved toward a more complete understanding of the topic--toward an understanding of what is" (p. 19).

Notice how the teacher in the following discussion treats literature in a non-literary way through a series of fact-oriented questions:

T: Now what kind of things begin to happen as Arthur tries to pull the sword from the stone?

S: He sees everything more clearly.

T: Right, he sees everything more clearly. You were going to say something, Connie?

S: The animals were cheering him on.

T: Yes, the animals do cheer him on. Does anyone know what a gargoyle was?

S: A statue in front of a building.

T: Okay. A gargoyle is like a figure that is supposed to ward off evil spirits. That is my understanding of a gargoyle. Let's look there on [page] 431.

S: Which column?

T: The second one.

S: If a gargoyle is supposed to ward off evil, then why does it look evil?

T: I'm not sure.

S: If you were a demon wouldn't you go where other demons were?

T: Well, it's like in the second column. Arthur says the sword is fixed, and he tries to pull it out (pointing the students' attention to the text). The animals are actually speaking. This is an example of supernatural that occurs. They all come to cheer Arthur on. Then he finally pulls out the sword. Now, we've always known Arthur was the true king, and Sir Ector now realizes this.

This conversation bears little trace of what Langer terms "reaching toward a horizon." The one glimmer that students may be trying to move beyond the literal meaning of the text (a student's question about gargoyles and evil warding off evil) is quickly overpowered by the teacher's apparent desire to move toward what Langer calls a "point of reference," associated with non-literary reading: the supernatural events in the story.

As her questioning continues, this teacher reinforces the search for "what <u>is</u>" in the text, by drawing attention to the marginal notes and vocabulary terms:

S: This version says the sword was pulled from a anvil.

T: Okay.

S: What is an anvil?

T: An anvil? What is that? What is an anvil used for?

S: That's something a blacksmith uses to ...

S: They also always drop an anvil on the roadrunner.

T: Yeah they do. Okay. Look at the picture on 430. It shows the anvil. And Dan, what did you say the blacksmiths use it for?

S: They use it to form nails.

T: To form the nails? Okay. I don't know that much about blacksmiths. So there you have the picture of Arthur pulling the sword from the stone. Now what is it Sir Kay does when Arthur comes back with the sword? We really get a good

picture of Sir Kay's character. What does Sir Kay do?

S: He says he pulled it out.

T: Just like Jeff says, Sir Kay tells his father that he pulled it out. Of course he lies. He finally admits the truth on p. 433 in the first column. Sir Ector then gets down on his knee to bow to Arthur, and do you know what condition of the joints Ector has?

S: Gout.

T: Gout. If you look at the bottom of the page, you see it is a condition that causes a painful swelling of the joints.

In this excerpt, students encounter **puzzles** to be solved, and not **problems** to be explored. A superficial discussion of anvils, blacksmiths, and an acute medical condition of the knee appears to undermine and overshadow what might have been an intriguing search for complexities and interpretations. The one hint that the teacher might be moving beyond a peripheral and surface interpretation--her comment about Sir Kay's character--is quickly overtaken by a question about Sir Ector's gout.

Thus, at least in this excerpt, compelling human issues--the struggle between love and power, goodness and evil, honor and dishonor--are apparently lost in the search for some very literal information. In attempting to **reduce** the difficulty of this text, the teacher has actually **created** a far more serious difficulty: training her students to approach a literary text in a non-literary way. In his recent examination of the patterns of talk in six secondary classrooms, Marshall (1989) concluded that:

> We seldom . . . found evidence that discussions were moving toward a point where teachers could remove themselves, disappear, and "watch it happen." We seldom saw evidence that students were moving much beyond answering their teachers' questions (however carefully these questions may have been framed). Rather, the general pattern seemed to be one of students' contributing to an interpretive agenda implied by those questions . . . . While the goal expressed by teachers was to help students toward a point where they could individually develop a reasoned response to the text, we saw in the classrooms we observed few occasions where students could practice such interpretive skills--at least during large-group discussions. (pp. 41-42)

Textbook Answers and Literary Understanding

One look at most current literature anthologies reveals how classroom questions, by attempting to reduce and make manageable the difficulty in literary texts, potentially reinforce and compound this difficulty. Notice the following excerpt of the discussion questions following an anthologized version of Jack London's "To Build a Fire":

> 1. (a) What is the setting in this story? (b) What details in the early part of the story make you aware of the intense cold? (c) Why is the setting important?

2. Review the handbook article on narrative point of view (page 558). (a) What point of view does Jack London use to tell this story? (b) Why do you think he uses this point of view?

3. (a) What advice was given by the old-timer at Sulpher Creek? (b) What was the man's reaction to this advice before he started on his journey?

4. Each of the references below has to do with the man's attitude toward his situation. Locate each reference and explain the attitudes expressed in the passage.

(a) page 404, column 1, paragraph 1

(b) page 407, column 2, paragraph 1

Six additional pages and paragraphs are listed (in Counterpoint in Literature, Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1976).

Readers often begin interpretations by making sense of the text in light of their own personal experiences/identifications. However, the questions in this textbook make little use of students' personal responses or meaning-making processes. They begin, not from the reader's initial response, but from a minor point within the text, by asking students to comment on the setting of the story. There is no open invitation to explore initial idiosyncratic responses. There is no mention of readers' engagement or feelings while reading the story.

The only reference to social understanding in this set of questions concerns the hero's "attitude" toward certain story events. One major difficulty with this question is the way in which students are asked to reconstruct piecemeal perceptions of the main character. Short answer questions such as "Locate each reference and explain the attitudes expressed in the passage" have been found to be less effective in encouraging literary interpretation (Marshall, 1987) than no questions at all, in that they fragment the reading process and preclude holistic meaning-making.

The questions about point-of-view are obviously designed to elicit students' knowledge of literary technique. Unfortunately, these decontextualized and seemingly pointless questions do little to help students to make the sort of "reading-writing" connections they were intended to develop. There is no apparent reason (other than demonstrating mastery to a teacher) for these questions. Students are not expected to experiment with third person narration (as opposed to first person) in their own writing. Asking them to check a handbook only further removes this activity from any real reading-writing context they might encounter.

As the previous comments of Ken, Jay, Cathy, and Hal indicate, study questions or textbook questions such as these often interfere with the aesthetic involvement and exploratory stance so necessary to literary reading. Whether questions are used before or after a reading experience, students have learned all too well the "skill" of marking places in the text and memorizing textual trivia. Such strategies often interfere with the very meaning-making processes they were intended to foster. When reading is taught as a "study skill," rather than an encounter with a text of potential significance, then literary reading takes on a difficulty far beyond the difficulty of basic comprehension and inference.

Thus, textbook and study questions often force students inside the text before they have had a chance to enter into an envisionment; they fragment the interpretive process into a consideration of individual aspects of the work, rather than the whole; they lead students away from the literary experience and into an auxiliary handbook or into preselected places in the text; they focus on literal fact-finding, rather than complex or personal meaning-making; finally, such questions often exist for no apparent purpose, except to convince the teacher or some other adult that the student has read and "understood" the selection.

As Brody, DeMilo, and Purves (1989) have observed in their assessment of current standardized literature tests and textbook examinations in the United States:

> The imaginative power of literature and the power of literature to capture the imagination and intellect of the reader remain unexplored in most of these assessments, which treat the texts as if they were no different from articles in encyclopedias. Under these conditions, it would seem difficult for students to see literature as anything but dead and lifeless; this view of literature is perpetuated by the most potent force in the curriculum, the test. (p. 30)

Difficult Questions and Questions of Difficulty

Ideally, teachers' questions should guide and support students as they move toward their own interpretive horizons. Frequently, however, teachers' questions fragment, flatten, objectify, and distract from the literary experience. Such questions invite students to prove that they have read and understood a text, rather than to explore a multitude of interpretations and possibilities.

Through their questions, teachers often unwittingly isolate readers from the classroom collective, privilege competition rather than collaboration, mystify the interpretive process, at the same time as they reduce it to the search for one right answer. More than this, teachers' questions typically place interpretive authority squarely in the hands of the teacher. Through class discussions and examinations, teachers' questions usually encourage intellectual passivity that impoverishes students and limits their ability to create a unique, personal, tentative, exploratory response.

Our questions should provide a framework that leads students to their <u>own</u> questions, laying open the vast horizon of possibilities, not closing it down, inviting students to ask questions of themselves and of each other. We should ask questions that are knowledge-producing, not knowledge-reproducing, a by-product of our <u>own</u> ongoing inquiry, not a residue of fixed and preformulated conclusions. Most importantly, our questions should give way to silent reflection at least as often as immediate articulation. Wolfgang Iser (1971) has said that "Literature simulates life, not in order to portray it, but in order to allow the reader to share in it" (p. 44). The same could be said of teachers' questions and literary interpretation. Questions should exist, not to <u>portray</u> literature, but to invite readers to <u>share</u> in it. And in that questioning and sharing of experience, students and teachers become empowered to embrace the difficulties and complexities unique to literary reading.

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